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CHAPTER III

HOUSES

361 171 823 WRITING of the social organization of the northern Nguni among the South-eastern Bantu, Mrs. Hoernlé[1] referred to three divisions of the typical village: the *indlunkulu* section where the principal hut was that of the mistress of the village; the *ikhohlo* section on the left-hand side of this hut, and the *inqadi* section on the right. The terminology used by the northern Nguni expressed right and left hand from the point of view of someone looking up from the gate of the kraal. I found that among the Ngoni they used right and left the other way as if the person were at the top of the kraal looking down at the gate, and I have adopted their usage.

171 361 554 Ngoni villages, which were royal villages or the head villages of Swazi and trans-Zambesi clans, also had a tripartite division into houses related to leading women, as we saw in the village plan in Chapter III of Part I, but there was a major difference between them and the northern Nguni grouping described by Mrs. Hoernlé. In Ngoni villages the *indlunkulu*, the hut at the head of the kraal, was occupied by the mother of the owner of the village, who had 'come out' with him from his father's village. In the right-hand section of the huts round the kraal was the hut of the owner's big wife, and on the left the hut of his next important wife. These three huts, representing three houses, were the focal points of the main divisions of the village. In fact in most villages the owner of the *indlunkulu* had the huts of other widows of her late husband beside her on each side, and the *cigodlo*, or section where the sons of the owner of the village lived, spread over a wide area behind the *indlunkulu* and behind the huts of the two chief wives. The plan used in Chapter III of Part I was necessarily simplified in order to bring out the main points. The grouping of huts in typical Ngoni villages showed varying degrees of elaboration, and it was not always easy at first to trace their connexions with the houses.

592 571 Houses in the Ngoni kingdoms could be considered as divisions of the village, though they did not always cover all the divisions. If we look at the membership of a house, as it was illustrated in a typical Ngoni village, it is clear that it had in it three elements connected by ties of kinship, affinity or association with the owner of the house, who was either a wife or a mother of the male owner of the village. The kinship group related to the *indlunkulu* comprised the male owner of the village, his mother and classificatory mothers with his brothers who had joined him. In the big house and in the second house of his wives the kinship

[1] op. cit. p. 83.

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561 boys took more interest and more part in adult occupations and affairs,
866 the emergence of leadership among Ngoni boys of high-ranking families was watched by their elders and recognized by their age mates. This was the formative period when a boy's capacity to succeed his father in a position of authority was carefully observed and judged. The Ngoni had ways of passing over a man who was a physical weakling, a coward in face of danger, a sadistic bully to weaker men, a pursuer of women and a breaker-up of marriages. The *madoda* in a Ngoni village, who appeared to let the boys in the *laweni* manage their own affairs without interfering, had nevertheless a shrewd idea of who was making good and who was proving disappointing. Their comments, showing continued observation over a long period, were often expressed when two or three friends and age mates from the *laweni* decided to go off to the south to work together. The *madoda* would then say: 'We hope they will come back soon and not be "lost". So and so is like his father and he will help us here in the village'; or they might comment: 'Good riddance, they were always hanging round the girls—worthless ones, indeed' (*wa chabe ndithu*).

881 It has already been pointed out that there was no circumcision school
856 nor public initiation rite among the Ngoni. At puberty the ritual observed was a private and personal affair. On a boy's first nocturnal emission his age mates informed an older boy in the *laweni*, who told him to go at once before it was light and bathe in the river, and to do so
[823 each morning after an emission. This use of cold water was believed to
827] give a boy strength and virility. The boy was also instructed by the older boys in the *laweni* on how to behave to his equals and his elders and to women. This stage was called *ukuchayiwa nga' manzi*, 'to be beaten with water', and was not reported to the older people. When the older people noticed that the boy's voice was breaking, his father inquired whether he had passed puberty and, on being assured of this, he found a man who knew the *uludengele* medicine. The father killed a goat, and the medicine man took some of the unchewed cud from the goat's stomach, mixed it with the bitter *uludengele* root and put it on a pan over a fire. This took place near the gate of the kraal or near the parents' hut, with the father and the father's male relatives standing by. When the mixture boiled, the boy was told to dip the tips of his fingers in the pan one after the other and lick each one quickly. At the same time he kept jumping over the fire and striking his elbows against his sides. The Ngoni believed that this medicine gave boys physical strength and stamina and they administered it to their servants' sons as well. It was still practised in the 1930's among Ngoni who were educated and partly westernized.

867 While the organization of the *laweni* catered for all boys from their
881 second teeth till their marriage, including boys from the age sets called *abantwana* and *amajaha*, the organization of girls' life followed a

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different pattern. They also went to sleep with a grandmother or some other older member of the family when they were old enough to be excluded from their mother's hut at night, and they shared with their small brothers the grandmother's care and her story-telling round the fire in the evenings. During the day the girls continued as part of their mother's household group, eating with her and the younger children. As little girls they were taught to sit down carefully and to smooth down the cloth which they wore round their waists. They were trained to speak correctly and to know the right forms of address, to greet strangers politely, to avoid touching their father's mats or bed, to eat tidily and with restraint. The emphasis was on exclusiveness for these high-born Ngoni girls, lest, as a result of mixing too freely with everyone, they should forget the teaching given and the behaviour which was expected of them. In contrast to their brothers' rigorous training in the *laweni*, Ngoni girls, as they showed signs of approaching puberty, were guarded and looked after and instructed further in correct behaviour.

When a girl found that she was menstruating for the first time, she told one of her age mates and sent her to tell her *gogo*.[1] The *gogo* told her to stay in the hut during the period and showed her how to wear a cloth between her legs, which she had henceforth to wear always whether menstruating or not. She was told to sleep from now on in a different part of the hut from the smaller children and never to bathe with younger girls. At the end of her first period the girl was escorted to the women's bathing-place by her father's sisters and other female members of her father's family. She was made to wash in the stream and squat in the cold water while doing so. I saw more than one child trying to control her shivering while her relatives watched to see if she would be strong and brave, or weak and cowardly. When she was in the water she was made to face south-east—the quarter which the Ngoni called *kwathu* (our home). After this ceremony the girl's father and mother were informed, and her father informed the head of his *banja* and the head of the village. The news was greeted with rejoicing and made generally public.

From about the age of ten or eleven, the Ngoni girl belonged to an age set distinguished by a separate name. She was no longer included in the group of children, as were her brothers of the same age, but was marked out by belonging to the age set called *inkakazana* or *mabuthu*. After her first menstruation she belonged to the age set called *izintombi* or *anamwali*. From this stage, Ngoni girls were under the close supervision of the older women. The association of a *gogo* or older woman with each house in a Ngoni village meant that the girls of the house were under her special care, particularly after they had passed puberty. There

[1] *gogo* in this context is used for grandmother or for the elderly woman to whose care the girl was assigned.

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1960
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girl's former nurse girl and had continued to take an interest 881
in the girl. This woman came to the hut, gave the girl a cloth to wear, told her to stay in the hut until the period was over, and instructed her companion to stay with her, bring her food, and look after her other needs. When the period was over, the companion told the senior helper who in the meantime had informed the girl's paternal grandmother, her father's sister (to whom a special message was sent to the village where she lived), and the girl's own mother. The information was always given in the phrase, 'This child has now matured.' The father's sister, who made a special visit for the [604]
purpose, came into the hut and told the girl to get up and follow her. A little procession formed, the father's sister leading, the girl immediately behind her, then the grandmother and other senior women of the father's house, the senior helper who had attended the girl, and finally the girl's mother. At the river the girl was made to take off her clothes [823]
and sit in shallow water, facing south-east, the ritual position adopted in all Ngoni crises of life and death. On the bank the women stood in silence and watched the girl splashing herself with water and trying to control her shivering, until she was allowed to come out and given clean clothes to put on.

Back at the grandmother's hut, the women sat on the veranda, the girl in front of them, legs tucked in sideways, head bent in a respectful attitude. The father's sister led off with some matter-of-fact instructions to the girl. At subsequent periods she would not be in seclusion but she would take every care to conceal her condition from everyone. She must always wear a cloth between her legs, whether menstruating or not, and she must now consider herself separated from the children's and the immature girls' groups. She would sleep only with mature girls in a senior helper's hut, and must wash in the river only with them, and never anywhere near young children or immature girls. Later on, not on this 881
occasion, the senior helper who had assisted her and felt 864

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and the notched sticks were only an *aide-mémoire*, not a necessity. 211

The heavens and the earth

When the Pleiades appeared just before dawn they said the Pleiades were being 'reborn' (the word used for the new moon's appearance and for the initiation of a diviner), and that in this position in the heavens they were heralds of the cold season. They knew the relative positions of Venus as an evening star and a morning star, and watched for the appearance high in the heavens of Jupiter which they knew by its size. Orion they recognized as a man with a spear, a hunter, and the Milky Way as the sands of the sky, since sand was used to denote numbers which cannot be counted. 821

In announcing the death of a great chief by a messenger sent from village to village, the traditional formula was: 'Listen. Do you hear? The heavens have fallen.' Hence when earthquakes were felt, it was believed that some great chief had died, and the earthquake was the trembling when his spirit left the earth for the place of the departed spirits. If it turned out to be no one of their own people, they nevertheless held to the belief that somewhere, unknown to them, a 'great one' had died and his spirit had departed at the time of the earth's trembling. 763 775 823

Eclipses of the sun and moon they also connected with some great event either among their own people or elsewhere, and they used the eclipse year and month to date these events. Their famous crossing of the Zambezi on their northward march, finally and irrevocably cutting off their connexions with the south, was during a solar eclipse. In teaching young adults Ngoni history they said: 'When we crossed the Zambezi it became night at noon.' 821 [167]

A lunar eclipse, almost total, occurred when I was in a chief's village, and all the people were called to the kraal and stood watching it. Then the chief's spokesman, his 'mouthpiece', called for silence in the phrase used for a war summons [632]

9: Read E-5 (1935) 1936 FR5 Ngoni FR5

portant chiefs. The Paramounts have told me that occasionally at their biannual ' meeting of chiefs ' and *indumas*, some recital of history is made, especially if they want to quote a precedent or examine an old custom with a view to change. This historical tradition therefore is alive and has a recognized function in regulating Ngoni life. In one area part of it has been written in the vernacular and is used as a school history book.[1] In the other areas the Paramounts have spoken of the need for something of the same kind, as they recognize that with the coming of modern education it is an effective way of training the young in the traditions of the Ngoni past.

In addition to recitals of tradition by ' historians ' there are many other reminders of the Ngoni past which are constantly before the people. An adequate examination of Ngoni history as it is expressed in their institutions and standardized behaviour would need an article to itself. I shall only mention here some ways and occasions through which tradition and old Ngoni institutions are brought before the people.

1. The praise songs of chiefs, war songs, regimental songs, names of famous regiments, and prayers for rain. These contain references, often rather obscure, to events and persons in the past. The praise songs are sung, or rather shouted, on special occasions, as when thanking the chief for beer, by members of important clans who alone know the words. The war songs and regimental songs recall the great days of conquest, and are sung and danced in war dress at big gatherings at the Paramount's village or at other chief's villages. The prayers for rain invoke the names of great chiefs in old days, but are now only a memory as they are no longer used in ceremonies—at least in none that I have found so far.

2. The names of prominent landmarks, such as hills and rivers where great chiefs built their villages and fights took place. Herd boys will point out a river and say, ' That is where Mtwalo built when he came from Choma ', or ' That hill is where Singu hid in the Azungu war '. The historical events attached to these places are widely known and constantly before people's eyes in the diversified landscape of hills and valleys.

3. Important village names. During the trek north, the names of

[1] In Mwambera's country.